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Military commander of West Bank: crackdown has stopped attacks on Jews

By Mary Curtius
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Ramallah, Israeli-occupied West Bank

The Israeli Army's six-month crackdown in the West Bank has ended a wave of attacks on Jewish settlers, soldiers, and visitors, according to the commander in charge of the territory.

"The situation today is a better situation than existed six months ago," says Col. Jacob Or. "I believe that we have stopped the wave."

In a rare on-the-record interview, Colonel Or attributed the decline in attacks to the deployment of elite Army units, the improvement of intelligence-gathering efforts, and the reimposition of measures against Palestinians that had not been used for years.

He singled out the use of administrative detention — the holding of someone without charge for up to six months — as having helped control unrest on Palestinian university campuses. Administrative detention has been used before by the Israelis, but was discarded three years ago, Or said. It was reintroduced four months ago on the West Bank in response to the stepped-up attacks on Israelis.

"It is too early to say if it was completely effective," he said, "but it has already had a very good effect." He said that more than 100 Palestinians are now being held in administrative detention on the West Bank.

Israel also reinstituted the use of expulsion, a measure feared by Palestinians, who see it as permanent exile. Eight Palestinians have been expelled to Jordan in recent months.

Colonel Or played down the two-day closure of An Najah University in Nablus this week. The military office reopened the university yesterday. Israel says problems with An Najah flared up three weeks ago, when students began holding pro-Palestine Liberation Organization protests on campus.

Under the military law enforced on the West Bank, demonstrations among Palestinians are not allowed. Saeb Erakat, spokesman for An Najah, says that the Israelis are harassing the students and faculty of the university: 20 students and two professors are being held in administrative detention. On Tuesday, the Israelis searched offices on the campus and found what they said were publications that could incite anti-Israeli sentiment.

The universities, he said, remain a constant source of tension between the Palestinians and the Israeli Army on the West Bank. "Many, many students are going to the universities, not to learn something but to be involved in the spirit of [Palestinian] nationalism," Or said. "Once it was decided [by Israel] that universities should be in the West Bank, there is no way — except closing totally — to find a solution to the problems they cause."

When Or assumed his post 1½ years ago, he found himself responsible for security for more than 800,000 Palestinians and between 45,000 and 50,000 Jews scattered in settlements. The area is a volatile mix of six nationalistic Palestinian universities, settlements that include right-wing Jewish settlers, large Arab towns, and small Arab villages that feel besieged by the settlers and the government's policies of expropriating land.

Soon after Or took over, attacks increased on Israeli soldiers and settlers in the West Bank and inside pre-1967 Israel. Israelis believe these attacks were carried out for nationalistic reasons. Some analysts said they believed the attacks signaled a new era in West Bank violence, fed by the example the Shiite guerrillas had given by attacking Israeli Army patrols in south Lebanon.

According to statistics put out by the Israeli Army spokesman's office, 20 Israeli civilians and soldiers have been murdered on the West Bank and inside pre-1967 Israel since July 1984. The figures for the numbers of Palestinians killed during the same period are incomplete,

but the Army figures record that a Palestinian girl was killed when shots were fired at her father's car on the West Bank, and an Arab taxi driver was murdered in Jerusalem. Three young Israelis were charged in the murder of the taxi driver.

Or said he believed Israel's three-year occupation of south Lebanon contributed to the rise in attacks on the West Bank, but not only by the example of Shiites "driving out" Israeli soldiers.
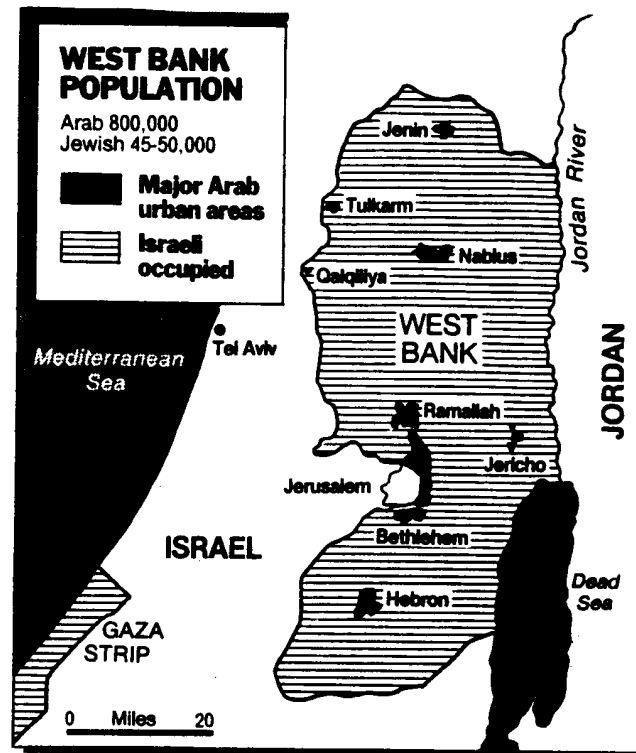
"In the last three years, during the fighting in Lebanon, our good units were in Lebanon and here were reservists who were not so young," Or said. "During that time, someone 18 years old in Nablus learned quickly that he could throw a stone at this soldier and it was hard for the soldier to catch him."

Once the bulk of Israeli troops were pulled out of Lebanon, Or said, they could be concentrated on the West Bank. The same was true for intelligence officers.

"Leaving Lebanon gave us the opportunity to be much stronger in the West Bank from the intelligence point of view," Or said.

Unrest and violence on the West Bank has come in waves since Israel occupied it in June 1967, Or said.

"There was a very bad period in the beginning, from 1967 until 1970," he said. "Groups of terrorists mainly infiltrated from Jordan." He said the period from 1970 to 1976 was relatively quiet. From 1977 to 1982, however,

WEST BANK POPULATION

Arab 800,000
Jewish 45-50,000

■ Major Arab urban areas

▨ Israeli occupied

"we found in the West Bank some leaders that were really leaders of people," Or said. From 1979 to 1982, the Israelis dismissed most West Bank mayors, several were deported, and two were maimed by Jewish terrorists.

Since '82, "the West Bank has been without real leadership." Today, "there is no situation of terrorism as we have it in other countries. There are not even any demonstrations like the demonstrations we had here in 1981." In fact, "without commenting on the political aspects, the situation here now is reasonable. We can survive, and by 'we' I mean everyone here. If the situation won't get worse than it is now, it can last this way until eternity."